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AUTHOR Van Shelhamer, C.; Waters, Robert
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ABSTRACT

A trial program at Montana State University (MSU) was designed to enhance students' chances for academic success by running an experimental seminar for students suspended for the first time. A unique problem exists for MSU students suspended at the end of the spring quarter. Since summer school is not a quarter, those suspended for the first time at the end of the spring quarter cannot re-enroll until the winter 6 months later. It was suggested that if students could stay rather than be suspended, the university's financial posture would improve and students would feel better about the educational experience. This would make MSU attractive and serve as a recruiting tool. In this experiment, when students were informed of their spring quarter suspension, they were told of the opportunity to return in the autumn quarter if they successfully completed a 40-hour academic achievement seminar. Fifty-five of the 180 suspended attended. The seminar covered career decision making, keys to excellence, university study skills and techniques, coping with college life, and college education perspective. Each student was assigned a mentor. Results include the following: all 55 successfully completed the seminar, and 49 registered for MSU's autumn quarter; of those who completed the winter quarter, 57.5% had a 2.0 or better GPA; and after three quarters, 61% of those enrolled in the autumn quarter were still eligible to enroll at MSU at the end of the spring quarter. Students were interviewed and expressed greater confidence since attending the seminar. (SM)

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SELF-CONCEPT: A TOOL FOR RETENTION OF COLLEGE STUDENTS

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C. Van Shelhamer
Robert Waters
Montana State University
Bozeman, Montana

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INTRODUCTION AND NEED

There exists at Montana State University, as on many campuses, a tendency to view those whose academic performance isn't up to snuff as unworthy of much attention. The fact that they aren't making the grade is seen as ipso facto proof that they aren't bright enough or mature enough to seek a college education. Concern about dropping enrollment and rejection of the notion that some students should be "thrown away" led a small number of faculty and student affairs professionals to recognize the value of instituting a program designed to foster improved academic performance and provide a means for retaining students who would other wise be suspended from the institution.

At the end of each quarter about 250 students are suspended from Montana State University. Another 375 students are placed on university probation, putting them in imminent danger of suspension. In addition, 2000 students are placed on college probation, the first warning to students of unacceptable academic performance. This means that approximately 25 percent of Montana State University students are on some form of probation during each quarter.

A unique problem exists with regard to those students who are suspended at the end of spring quarter. Summer school is not counted as a quarter, therefore, students who are suspended for

HE 022 260

the first time at the end of spring quarter cannot re-enroll until winter quarter--a time period of six months. Students suspended at the end of any other quarter only have to wait three months.

If students could be retained rather than suspended, the university's financial posture would improve and students would be much happier about their educational experience. It was also recognized that such a program would make the institution much more attractive to students and thereby serve as a recruiting tool.

SOLUTION TO THE PROBLEM

A small core group of interested professionals were formed to discuss the development of a program to enhance student's chances for academic success. Approval was eventually sought and received from the Curriculum Committee and Council of Assistant Deans to run an experimental seminar for students who had been suspended for the first time at the end of spring quarter 1987.

When the Academic Vice President informed students of their suspension at the end of spring quarter, they received notification of the opportunity to return autumn quarter providing they successfully completed a 40-hour Academic Achievement Seminar. In mid July, the office of Extended Studies, mailed a letter explaining the seminar and an application blank to the 180 students who were suspended spring quarter 1987. Students were given two weeks to return their application and a $75 nonrefundable registration fee. Acceptance into the seminar was on a first come first served basis. Sixty-five students sent in their registration and all were accepted into the seminar.

SEMINAR ACTIVITIES

The seminar consisted of 40 hours of intense activities which required the students to have one-hundred percent attendance and active participation. Roll was taken at each session and the three principal facilitators in charge of instruction during the seminar were required to make judgments about whether or not a student should be given a passing mark for that session.

The major concept with subtopics were as follows:

1. Career Decision Making: Students dealt with assessing values, skills, and interests as they related to the world of work; brainstormed fantasy careers; completed an interest inventory; selected career areas which seemed to "fit" unique personalities; researched those careers; and took a guided fantasy trip through a career area of the student's choice. The subtopics were the following: Using Self-Assessment to Identify Potentially Satisfying Career and Career Library Utilization.

2. Keys to Excellence: The "KEYS" approach to self-image enhancement helped the students learn to alter the way they talked to themselves and to utilize a proven technique for goal setting and achievement. Students learned the difference between winner and loser self-talk and developed techniques for "harvesting" their past experiences in a positive way. Subtopics were as follows: Problems and Challenges Facing Today's College Student; The Conscious and Unconscious Thought Process; The Creative Subconscious; Self-Talk; Success and Your Emotions; Changing Habits, Attitudes, and Comfort Zones; Keys to Unlocking Your Mind's Eye; and Goal Setting.

3. Universities Study Skills and Techniques: Students learned how to synthesize, learn and retain college level materials, reduce levels of test anxiety and achievement stress, and developed learning skills and time management techniques to give themselves a quality education, not merely a degree. Subtopics were as follows: Information Management; Research and Writing Papers; Neurological Channels of Learning; How to Study For and Take College Exams; Thinking/Learning and Teaching Styles; Time Management; and Library Secrets.

4. Coping with College Life: Learning to cope with the demands of college life is a significant key to academic success. Students learned the basic elements of how negative stress inhibits learning and learned several stress management strategies for combating negative stress. Subtopics were as follows: Coping with College Life; and Development of Support Groups.

5. A College Education, Tunnel Vision vs. Global Perspective: Students learned about the purpose of a college education and the philosophy underlying MSU's core curriculum.

The seven MSU faculty members and student affairs professionals who were involved in the seminar agreed to serve as mentors for small groups of students. Each mentor was assigned seven students with whom he/she were to meet periodically during the quarter. I have to admit that this was the weak link in the program, yet was very helpful for those students whose groups met. As a result, the mentoring process was revised for 1988 seminar.

RESULTS

All fifty-five students successfully completed the seminar. Of those fifty-five, forty-nine registered at MSU autumn quarter, two registered at other state colleges, and four chose not to return to college.

Grades for the students were analyzed at the end of autumn and winter quarters. The results for autumn quarter show that five (10%) had a quarter GPA of 3.0 or above. Thirteen (27%) had a GPA between 2.5 and 2.99, 12 (24%) had a GPA between 2.0 and 2.49, 10 (20%) had a GPA between 1.26 and 1.99 while 9 (18%) students had a GPA below 1.26. Eight of the 9 students earning less than a 1.25 were suspended at the end of autumn quarter.

The results for winter quarter show that forty students registered for and completed the quarter. Four (10%) of the students earned a quarter GPA of 3.0 or better, 4 (10%) earned a GPA between 2.5 and 2.99, 15 (37.5%) earned a GPA between 2.0 and 2.49, while 17 (42.5%) had a GPA of less than 2.0. Eight students were suspended at the end of the quarter. The salient fact here is that 57.5% of those who completed winter quarter finished the quarter with a 2.0 or better GPA.

Spring quarter data show that 28 students enrolled and completed the quarter. Four (14%) of the students had a GPA of 3.00 or better. Six (21%) had a GPA between 2.50 and 2.99 while 9 (34%) had a GPA between 2.00 and 2.49. Seven (25%) had a GPA between 1.26 and 1.99. One of these students were suspended. Two (7%) other students were suspended for having a GPA of less than 1.25.

In conclusion, the data show that after 3 quarters 30 (61%) students who enrolled Autumn quarter were still eligible to enroll in the University at the end of spring quarter.

One may wonder how the students felt about the seminar and was it effective in helping them. To shed some light on this issue from the perspective of students, it is useful to examine some of the thoughts they shared in their final evaluation. 1. Good to hear that professors have faith in students; 2. I did not expect such caring people; 3. I am almost glad I failed so that I could have this experience; 4. I will be a better person the rest of my life; 5. Consider offering the seminar to second quarter freshman; 6. Offer seminar before suspension; 7. Without the seminar, we would have likely failed when returning next quarter; and 8. For the first time in my life I am excited about school.

Several students were interviewed several weeks into the autumn quarter to get their reaction about the seminar. A pre-veterinary major said, "I've learned how to trust myself. Before I had a real negative attitude. I've learned how to talk myself into doing things. It used to be when I studied, I'd tell myself, 'You can't learn this, no matter how hard you try.' Now I know I can do what I set out to do. I'm more confident and relaxed in a lot of things".

A junior in mechanical engineering credits the seminar with helping him tackle "procrastination and personal problems that added up to low grades". He went on to say, "I was almost ready to quit school. I doubt that I would have come back had the program not been available. Now I certainly have a better chance of achieving my goals".